

The “I”-Window

A response at SBL, 2012, to Barbara M. Leung Lai, *Through the “I” Window* (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2011)

Professor Lai, you have given us a creative, innovative, and interesting book, extraordinarily widely-read and widely-referenced. I take it that your main thesis is that there are persons or personalities with emotions who make themselves known in the Old Testament, and that we can gain access to the way they are revealing themselves by utilizing our own self-awareness and emotions as human beings. You give us the theoretical underpinnings for this conviction and then illustrate it by considering Daniel, Isaiah, and God. I want first to raise some questions, then give an example of the way your work has pushed me on my thinking.

My main question concerns how real you think is the person you investigate. Your choices of subjects to study were intriguing – Daniel, Isaiah, and God. In the books of Daniel and Isaiah you chose two books that are most explicit in relating to more than one identifiable but widely separated historical context. Daniel 1 – 6 relates directly to the situation of people living in the dispersion in the Persian period; Daniel 7 – 12 relates explicitly to the situation of people living in Jerusalem in the 160s. Now there are contexts in which one could ignore this difference. There is a recent book by Aaron Hebbard called *Reading Daniel as a Text in Theological Hermeneutics* that does deftly sidestep this difference, on the basis that it makes no difference to its thesis. But I don’t see how you can do so in seeking to study Daniel as a person. I am quite prepared to believe that there was a man called Daniel whose story lies behind Daniel 1 – 6. But the “I” that speaks in Daniel 7 – 12 is not this Daniel. Likewise, I believe that the author of the visions in Daniel 7 – 12 was inspired by Daniel’s own vision in Daniel 2, rather in the way that the visions in the Revelation to John were inspired by the visions in Daniel, Ezekiel, and elsewhere. They were real visions, but they were facilitated by those earlier visions, and the actual visionary attributed the visions to Daniel because he was their inspiration. Yet he was a different person. You ask whether the original community of readers perceived the Daniel presented in chapters 1 -6 as the same authentic historical figure as the Daniel behind the “I” voice in chapters 7 – 12 (p. 47). You rightly note that these first readers accepted the whole book as from God, though I was not clear whether you were implying that the visionary’s self-presentation was a key factor in its accepting the visions. While this may be so, it seems more likely to me that the key factor was that the deliverance from Antiochus provided as solid proof as one could expect that the visions came from God, because it fulfilled them. You make a comment about its possible understanding of the visions’ pseudonymity (p. 48), but I wasn’t clear about the implications of your comment.

Something similar applies to Isaiah. You are convinced by the argument that we can read Isaiah from the angle of the original community’s acceptance of the entire book as of divine origin (p. 47). I am not averse to that idea, though I am not sure it helps us with the question of the significance of the use of “I” through the book. The prophet who relates his experience in Isaiah 40 – 55 is a different person from the one who speaks in Isaiah 1 – 39, and the prophet who speaks in Isaiah 56 – 66 is another person. The second Isaiah was inspired by the first Isaiah and the third Isaiah was inspired by both, though each of these latter prophets was inspired

by this predecessor while also having new things to say. In what sense, then, can one speak of a Danielic person or an Isaian person? You refer to the way Michael Fox speaks in terms of our reading characters "as if they were real" (p. 16). So are they not actually real? Are we reading Daniel or Isaiah as if it were Hamlet? I can see that this is a viable approach to Ruth or Esther, but the way in which Daniel and Isaiah draw attention to their different contexts does not make it easy to see how it is a viable approach to these books.

The case is easier to make with Isaiah. You quote an observation to the effect that attempts to pull out a prophetic figure from Isaiah 40 – 55 have proved difficult and out of Isaiah 56 – 66 almost impossible (p. 78), and I think you imply that it is much more possible than this comment implies; indeed, you go on to demonstrate its possibility. But what the book presents us with is at least three prophetic figures. There is an "I" in Isaiah 1 – 39, another in Isaiah 40 – 55, and another in Isaiah 56 – 66. The book of Isaiah is not a work like Hamlet in which an author sought to portray one person, and neither is it like an autobiography in which an author seeks to portray himself or herself. When we come to Isaiah 40, the text makes clear that the "I" that now speaks is a different "I" from the one in Isaiah 1 – 39. It does so by identifying this "I" as commissioned to speak to people who are living two centuries after Isaiah ben Amoz but who are the contemporaries of this "I." Of course subsequent readers lost sight of this fact, but I don't see reason to think that the contemporaries of the second Isaiah must have failed to see it. In other words, there is no single "I" in the book of Isaiah. There is no Isaianic person. Likewise there is no Danielic person.

You speak of the "authenticity" of the book of Isaiah (p. 80). What does this term mean? You refer to the "genuine" Isaian, Danielic, or divine "I" (p. 38). What does the word *genuine* mean in this context? What do you mean by the "genuine 'I' voice of Daniel" in connection with Daniel 9 (p. 69)? Daniel 9 is not actually a statement by the Daniel who appears in the first part of the book. In connection with Daniel 10 you comment, "whether it is by an author writing pseudonymously who endowed the persona Daniel with certain character traits, or it is written by the autobiographer himself as a first-person report – readers cannot help but wonder about the intentional design behind this piece of literature" (p. 70). Indeed they cannot.

Related issues are raised by the divine "I." At least it is the case that when an "I" speaks in a passage such as Isaiah 6, it is reasonable to infer that this "I" is personally giving us his testimony. But when the divine "I" speaks in Isaiah 5 or Jeremiah 8 – 9 or Hosea 11 this is not so. The divine "I" is mediated by someone else. One can make an analogy with the way the Danielic "I" is mediated by someone else in Daniel 7 – 12. A propos of Hosea 11 you comment, "The degree and extent of anthropomorphism used in this poetry justifies reading the God-talk... as religious language" (159-60). If it is religious language, this presumably means it is human language (does God use religious language?). In what sense is it the case that in the three passages "dimensions in the interiority of the Hebrew God have been disclosed to us" (p. 166)?

Now the way in which you have furthered my own thinking, about Isaiah. While I am not yet persuaded that there is such a thing as the Isaianic person, there is indeed such a thing as the second Isaiah person, the "I" who speaks in Isaiah 40 – 55, and your work has clarified for me possibilities about one or two detailed point in these chapters and also opened up possibilities with regard to the biggest question about the chapters. All these insights emerge from your comments on the

way people sometimes speak of themselves in the third person, which allows some distancing and a broader angle of perception than obtains when one speaks in the first person.

The detailed point concerns the text of 40:6. An unnamed voice bids, "Proclaim," and another voice says, "What shall I proclaim?" . You make interesting comments here on the nature of the possible internal dialog involved in this passage. The insight you pointed me towards concerns the textual issue in this verse; amusingly I think you don't realize that your approach points towards a resolution of the issue. The question is, whose is this second voice? In the Masoretic Text the verb form is *wē'amar*, which means "and he says." There is no antecedent for the "he," so presumably we have an instance of the recognized idiom whereby the subject of such a verb is indefinite. Thus the Jewish Publication Society Translation has "And another asks, 'What shall I proclaim?'" You thus instance the line as an instance of third-person projection of the "I" voice (p. 132). But the Septuagint has "But I said, 'What shall I proclaim?," which implies the same Hebrew consonants differently pointed, *wā'ōmar*; further, one of the manuscripts of Isaiah from Qumran has what looks like a first-person form, *w'mrh*. On textual grounds, it's not easy to decide between the two readings. The first person makes better sense in the context, but that fact raises the question why it would have got altered to the third-person form and may suggest that the third-person form is original.

Your observations on the way people may speak of themselves in the third person, allowing for some distancing and a broader angle of perception, suggests a plausible way of understanding these textual phenomena. On both readings, the prophet is self-referring, but does so in one reading by using the third person, in the other by using the first person. The more plausible understanding seems to me to be that the third-person reading is then original and the first-person reading is a correct interpretation of its significance by copyists and translators who did not "get" the rhetoric of the original.

The biggest question about Isaiah 40 – 55 is the interpretation of Isaiah 53, and on reading your book I felt as if you had provided me with the last piece in a jigsaw puzzle, as you expounded this insight about people speaking of themselves in the third person, though again it is not an inference you draw.

After considering Isaiah 40 you move to Isaiah 49 and 50. With regard to the "I" passages in these two chapters, Norman Whybray made the observation that is common-sense yet has been widely ignored, "In view of the fact that in the prophetic books generally the subject of speeches in the first person singular, when it is not Yahweh and is not otherwise indicated, is normally the prophet himself, it is remarkable that this identification should have been contested in this case by so many commentators." Yes, Isaiah 49:1-6 and 50:4-9 are the "I" of the prophet. You do not go on to refer to Isaiah 50:10-11:

Who among you reveres Yhwh, listens to his servant's voice?
One who has walked in deep darkness and had no brightness
must trust in Yhwh's name and lean on his God.

You do note that verses 4-9 do not use the word servant. But then that word comes in verses 10. Who speaks here? Is it not the prophet, whom chapter 49 has already designated Yahweh's servant? Is he not self-referring? Is verse 10 not a

continuation of the “I” voice, in what you call a “third-person projection of a first-person view (p. 111).

That suggestion takes me to Isaiah 53. Let me step back for a moment to say a word about the servant in Isaiah 40 – 55. Over a century ago Bernhard Duhm isolated four passages about God’s servant from within these chapters and declared that they were later additions to the text and did not fit there. They needed to be taken out of their present context and interpreted in relation to one another. Two strange consequences followed from Duhm’s suggestion. One is that it came to be accepted as fact, so that everybody refers to “the servant songs” as if they were as objectively identified a collection of passages as (say) the Psalms of Ascent. The other is that over a century the world of scholarship generated scores of theories about the identity of the servant of the songs, without any of the theories generating a consensus. The reason is that while the so-called songs may be difficult to interpret in their context, they are quite impossible to interpret when they have no context.

So I accept the view that we must say goodbye to the servant songs and seek to interpret each passage in its context. Which is not so difficult. Claus Westermann provides the key to understanding the first of them, in Isaiah 42, by pointing out that its concern lies not with the identity of the servant but with the task of the servant. Isaiah 41 has identified Israel as the servant; Isaiah 42 expounds what is then the servant’s task. It is both significant that the exposition follows that identification and also that it does not repeat the identification, because as the chapter goes on to make explicit, Israel is actually too blind and deaf to fulfill the role. That fact is then the background to the double testimony in Isaiah 49 and 50 where the prophet’s “I” testifies to being given the role of the servant in order to bring about Israel’s restoration, and testifies to having discovered that there was a price to be paid for seeking to fulfill that role.

In Isaiah 53 the prophecy then returns to speaking of the servant in the third person, and I used to be inclined to assume that a corollary of Whybray’s remark concerning first-person prophecies is that a third-person prophecy does *not* refer to the prophet. I thus sometimes worked with the idea that it parallels the other descriptive passage in Isaiah 42 and simply portrays what the servant’s vocation is. Yet I was dissatisfied because this understanding does not make for a clear train of thought in the unfolding of the chapters in Isaiah 40 – 55, which is troublesome because in other respects they have unfolded very carefully. Whybray’s own way of avoiding his own logic is to see the prophecy as written *about* the prophet *by* his disciples after his death. It is then noteworthy that Whybray sees the passage as modeled on the form of a thanksgiving psalm. But a thanksgiving psalm usually takes first-person form; it is someone’s way of testifying to what God has done for him or her. And notwithstanding Whybray’s principle, I have been inclined to think that the passage is actually a prophecy by the prophet concerning himself. I have justified this understanding theologically; why should God not give a prophet a prophecy or vision about himself, in which the prophet is indeed looking at or thinking about himself?

In this connection, you have given me a way of thinking about Isaiah 53 as what you call a third-person projection of a first-person view. (I use the expression “Isaiah 53” to refer loosely to Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12). By beginning with Yahweh’s reference to “my servant,” the prophecy resumes from that third-person allusion in Isaiah 50:10, “Who among you reveres Yhwh, listens to his servant’s voice?”

Like Isaiah 21, Isaiah 53 is a “multi-voiced text characterized by the intertwining of speaking voices” (p. 110). Perhaps I exaggerate, because the only voices that directly speak are Yahweh and a mysterious “we,” though that is enough to point to another parallel with Isaiah 21 where you note that the speaking voices cannot be identified with precision (p. 111). But the voices in Isaiah 53 refer to further voices – the “we” refer to the voice that remains silent when attacked, and Yahweh refers to the same voice that intercedes or appealed for the rebels. Like Isaiah 21, Isaiah 53 incorporates “imaginary dialogues within monologue” (p. 111); both the word dialogue and the word imaginary are significant. Like Isaiah 21, Isaiah 53 merges voices to highlight a unified theology (p. 111). Like Isaiah 21, Isaiah 53 uses the dialogue of voices to convey the prophet’s selfhood (p. 111).

Most significantly, Isaiah 53 incorporates “a third-person projection of a first-person view” (p. 111). Indeed, Isaiah 53 as a whole is such a third-person projection. It is when we see it in association with the explicit first-person speech in chapters 49 and 50 that one could speak of the chapters *incorporating* such a projection. Like Isaiah 21, the third-person self-representation notes emotive aspects of the person; he is silent and he lets himself be subdued.

Like Isaiah 21, Isaiah 53 uses third-person speech to express the message’s horrifying implications for the prophet, though the implications in Isaiah 53 are much more horrifying, which might explain the more systematic use of third-person representation. He needs to describe himself as an appalling sight, lacking impressiveness or attractiveness, despised and rejected. He is thought to be punished by God, yet injured actually as a result of other people’s wrongdoing and as the means of restoring relationships between them and Yahweh, but thus carrying the consequences of their waywardness, and doing so because Yahweh intended it. He seems likely to end up dying. His vocation is to turn his obedient acceptance of his undeserved suffering into an offering to God that might compensate for the rebelliousness of his people. In his imagination, people have come to see that their original assessment was wrong, and with the eyes of a hope based on Yahweh’s promises, he can picture himself acknowledged and successful in his ministry, restored and enjoying a long life, and seeing many offspring.

You note, Dr Lai, that speaking of oneself in the third person allows some distancing and a broader angle of perception; it allows for more control; it maintains the objectivity of the person, and it frees one to adopt something of the stance of an omniscient narrator (pp. 39-40). It will not be surprising if it is more feasible to articulate what Isaiah 53 articulates if the prophet is able to achieve some distancing and objectivity. Maybe it also aids our experientially entering into dialogue with the Isaiah consciousness represented in this polyphonic text. Isaiah 53 has long seemed one of the most mysterious and most profound chapters in the Old Testament; I thank you for your work which enables us to penetrate a little more into its mystery and profundity.